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AUTHOR Murray, John P.
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to identify the expectations that faculty have of chairpersons. Previously, a study using a modified Delphi technique had revealed that the 50 participants believed that the chair should be responsible for a multitude of duties. However, the participants had a marked preference for shared or participatory leadership. Subsequent to the Delphi process, qualitative open-ended interviews were conducted with 10 faculty members to identify the influences and motivations for their responses to the Delphi items. The theme that the primary duty of a department chairperson is to facilitate the work of faculty was emphasized by all but one of the respondents. They frequently alluded to the lack of a precise role definition and the resultant organizational and morale problems and the tendency to overburden the chairperson. This ambiguity over the proper role may result from the difficulty of managing equally qualified professionals. The qualities sought in a department chair were unanimously agreed to be primarily interpersonal in nature. The dichotomous position of the chairperson as both faculty and administration means that neither group wholly trusts the incumbent. The study report includes the experiences of one departmental chair which confirm the study findings. (JSP)

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THE DEPARTMENT CHAIRPERSON: THE CONFESSIONS OF A RESEARCHER TURNED PRACTITIONER

JOHN P. MURRAY, Ph.D.
CLARK STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE
SPRINGFIELD, OH

prepared for

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE TEACHING AND ADMINISTRATION

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The department chairperson may be the singularly most important administrative position. "A brilliant university or college administration with inept chairpersons cannot survive; an inept administration with the help of a group of brilliant chairpersons usually can" (Tucker, 1984, p. 4). The symbiotic connection between the quality of the education delivered and the quality of departmental leadership seems beyond dispute (Hammons, 1984; Whitson and Hubert, 1982; Bennett, 1983). Low morale, job dissatisfaction, and/or stress related illnesses are but a few of the effects of role conflict and ambiguity suffered by chairpersons (Turner and Boice, 1989; Hageseth & Atkins, 1988; Singleton, 1987). Therefore, it becomes imperative to identify the expectations others have of chairpersons. Despite the critical importance of chairpersons to the success of a college, the expectations that faculty have of chairpersons has received very little attention. The study reported here was one attempt to remedy this deficit.

The study discussed in this paper was conducted as a follow-up to a previous study. The first study used a modified Delphi technique (Murray, in press) and involved 50 participants. The follow-up study used qualitative interviewing techniques.

The Delphi study revealed that the participants believed that the chairperson was or should be responsible for an enormous multitude of duties. However, the Delphi participants displayed a marked preference for shared or participatory leadership. The

activities deemed of highest priority dealt with representing the department to the administration and others, sharing the decision-making process with department members, and fairly allocating work assignments.

Interviewing Rationale

Interviews were conducted at the conclusion of the Delphi process in an attempt to uncover the influences and motivations for individuals' responses to the Delphi items. Because the interviewer was primarily interested in uncovering the meanings that participants attributed to their experiences, qualitative, open-ended interviews were used. "The purpose of open-ended interviewing is...to access the perspective of the person being interviewed" (Patton, 1980, p. 196).

The basic difference between qualitative, open-ended interviews and quantitative, survey-type interviews involves the amount of structure introduced by the researcher. Qualitative interviews are unstructured or loosely structured, while quantitative interviews are completely structured. This investigation started with a series of unstructured, open-ended interviews.

The unstructured interview relies on the interviewee's account of what is relevant or meaningful to his or her situation. Basic to any qualitative study is the assumption

> that communities, schools, and social settings of any variety, have pluralistic sets of values that may from time to time cause conflict....to understand what those sets of

> values are and to understand at which points they are in conflict, it is necessary to ground inquiry and evaluation activities in the multiple perspectives that are held by the group or community leaders and participants. The standardized or survey interview assumes value consensus (and handles variations in expected "norms" statistically) and therefore does not take account of multiple world views. But to get at manifold value systems the evaluator must let them arise from the context in whatever way the respondents express them. And it is the so-called elite interview that most readily allows such belief systems to emerge and allows the evaluator to record and systematize them in such a way that they can be arrayed against each other (Guba and Lincoln, 1981, p. 156).

Clearly, the Delphi process that proceeded this study had revealed the existence of pluralistic, conflicting perspectives on the role of department chairpersons. However, the Delphi process had only revealed the conflicting world views; it had not clarified how they had come about or how they interacted in the day-to-day existence of the chairperson. The follow-up study using qualitative interviewing techniques was needed to provide some insight into how individuals arrived at their beliefs regarding the proper role of chairpersons.

Interviewing Instrumentation

To conduct the interviews for this study, the researcher designed protocols based on Patton's (1980) categories of

qualitative interviews. The fundamental differences among these interviews involves the degree of structure imposed by the interviewer. According to Patton's taxonomy, there are two types of relatively, free-flowing qualitative interviews--the informal conversational interview (also called the phenomenological approach) and the general interview guide approach (p. 197). The fundamental difference is the degree of control the interviewer assumes both before and during the interview session. "The phenomenological interviewer wants to maintain maximum flexibility to be able to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate....No predetermined set of questions is possible..." (Patton, 1980, p. 198-199).

This study began with a series of informal conversational interviews because their format allowed the participants to define the issues and topics that were important to them. However, the flexibility of this format can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. "The strength of the phenomenological approach to interviewing is that it allows the interviewer...to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes. Questions can be individualized..." (Patton, 1980, p. 199).

Despite the enormous appeal of the flexibility that phenomenological interviews provide, this same flexibility is also a potential weakness. "...it may take several conversations with different people before a similar set of questions has been posed to each participant...The informal conversational interview

is also more open to interviewer effects..." (Patton, 1980, p. 200).

To mitigate these potential disadvantages, a second series of interviews using the general interview guide approach were also conducted. According to Patton (1980) the "interview guide simply serves as a basic checklist during the interview to make sure all relevant topics are covered...but no set of standardized questions is written in advance" (Patton, 1980, p. 198).

The advantage of the general interview guide approach is that it "helps make interviewing across a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting the issues to be discussed in the interview" (pp. 200-201). Thus, using a general interview guide approach where the interview categories emerged from the informal conversational interviews, provided a reliable means to convert the disadvantages of the phenomenological interviews into advantages.

The selection of the interview candidates was the first and most crucial step. A positivistic researcher would randomly select the candidates. However, in order to weave meaning into the divergent accounts of the participants, it was crucial to this study that those interviewed have special knowledge.

> ...multiple realities are contained in the unique, the singular, the idiosyncratic, the deviant, the exceptional, the unusual, the divergent perceptions of individuals, as they live or lived the experience. The [qualitative] interview is thus an attempt to reach the non-normative: the

> person who has a singular view because of his expertise, position, or insight; the respondent with special information; and/or the interviewee who is central to a situation or otherwise holds a unique position (Guba and Lincoln, 1981, p. 157).

The selection of individuals meeting these qualification was undesirable and improbable before the Delphi process began. During the successive iterations of the Delphi, the tone and/or content of certain individual's responses suggested their inclusion in the interview stage.

At the conclusion of the Delphi stage, certain themes began to emerge and some participants' responses suggested that they may have more insight into the role expectations of the chairperson in the two-year college or that they may be outside the mainstream of thought represented by the group to which they belonged. These individuals were asked to agree to be interviewed. Once the interviews were underway the initial respondents were asked to suggest others to be interviewed, a technique recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1981, p. 172). In total, 10 (20%) of the Delphi respondents were selected and interviewed. In an effort to accurately capture a rich and thick data set the in actual words of the participants, each interview was audiotape recorded.

RESULTS

The data from the interviews confirm that the respondents associate the important duties of department chairpersons with a shared governance or a participatory leadership style.

During the interviews, all ten respondents found it difficult to succinctly summarize what they believed to be the pivotal responsibilities of an academic department chairperson. Although the responses varied considerably on exact details when describing the chairperson's functions, all but one chose to use the word "facilitator" to describe the chairperson. One respondent said:

> He or she has several different roles and I think it is very important that the department chair should be a faculty advocate and a facilitator for faculty. He or she should speak on behalf of faculty and work to facilitate the wishes and desires of faculty as much as possible, taking those wishes and desires and so forth to the appropriate individuals.

Another respondent, while also noting the variety of role expectations placed on a department chairperson, also emphasized the importance of the facilitating role. A typical comment was:

> I see their role as facilitating the work of the faculty in terms of facilitating the instructional process...whatever the faculty need by way of classroom materials, by way of the class itself.

The theme that the primary duties of a department chairperson are to facilitate the work of faculty was reiterated by all but one of the interviewees. One respondent seemed in disagreement when he said: "I would see the department chair as a leader--definitely I would be definite on that one." However, when asked to define the leadership role, the respondent was reluctant to ascribe strong leadership roles to a department chairperson.

> [A chairperson is not] a complete leader--less than that and more than a first among equals. A first among equals would be kind of just coordinating things, whereas a leader would be someone who would take a kind of a definite position on things and kind of move people around with them--that is going a bit too far for my liking for a chairperson, but I think that it should be a little more than just the person who is there keeping things moving.

The position of department chairperson in a two-year college is much too fluid and ambiguous to be easily labeled. Although the interviewees elected to use the word "facilitator", their use of this descriptor was ambiguous. They often searched for a description of what they see to be a multi-faceted position. The choice of "facilitator" seems to best capture the almost endless number of tasks chairpersons do or have performed. Much of the ambiguity over the proper roles or duties seems traceable to the wide variety of tasks formally or informally assigned to department chairpersons. One respondent, who is also a

chairperson, argued that although she sees her "major role" as a "facilitator", the job is "many faceted."

> I play all those roles...and that is the funny thing about this job that it does have many hats, but sometimes I do have to do management. In fact in certain instances, I do function as a supervisor. If there is a real thorny issue or if someone is not doing his or her job, I suppose then the hat as facilitator does go off and I do become a supervisor, and maybe it is that things aren't clearly defined as one thing. I think we are all of those things if we are doing our job well."

The respondents' propensity toward describing the chairperson's role in terms of facilitating and only hesitantly in terms of leading, supervising, and/or managing seems to have two explanations. First, respondents frequently alluded to the lack of a precise role definition and the consequent tendency to overburden the chairperson. Second, in academic organizations faculty often seem to view themselves equally qualified to manage the department, but superior enough not to take the position.

Many respondents argued that the imprecise role definition generated demands on a department chairperson's time that seem unreasonable. One respondent said:

> they do so much right now....a grab bag. Nobody knows what to do with this chore so they throw it to the division chair....I think that our division chair has too much to do. I think that position has too much to do.

The notion that the chairperson becomes responsible for all the tasks that seem to have no other home was reiterated by a chairperson:

> The one thing I would say...I get involved when...it begins to grind on a faculty member. If it happens to be that there is no podium in the room, then it becomes my issue.... Whatever the issue, no matter how trivial it may seem to someone else, if it begins to bother a faculty member, then I hear it...."

Later in the interview, the respondent reflected on the inefficiency that flows from the ill-defined role expectations.

> I do think we are sort of the jacks of all trades because there is nothing in between....sometimes I don't think my time is well used because of all the things I have to do, but I don't know who else would do them.

Another chairperson respondent made much the same observation regarding the inefficient use of time that the demands of the role generate.

> It seems that a lot of the work of the department chair, maybe this is true no matter where you are, but what is called administrative or management things are very often clerical kinds of things ...you're looking at class schedules and room assignments and even inventory...all that stupid little stuff like that. You know, I wish I had an administrative assistant to take care of it."

The second theme that might explain the ambiguity over the proper roles for the department chairperson is the difficulty of managing equally qualified professionals. "One of the hardest things about governing an academic institution is that you are all equals." An administrator respondent reflected:

> You know, I think another major issue that most department chairs have to deal with is how do you provide leadership, management, supervision in some cases...to a group of professionals...You have a group of professionals who have some expertise. The department chairperson may or may not have expertise in that particular area...and that creates some conflicts....They really in many cases resent the supervision aspect of it and resent feeling like someone is organizing them or managing them so that is a real...a real difficult thing for all division administrators to deal with."

A chairperson respondent summed up the tension created by the ambiguous mandate to lead when he said "it takes a different leadership attitude....[The chairperson] is a first among equals; he is not a supervisor." The tension created by the role ambiguity was also noted by faculty members. A faculty member contrasted the manager role in business with that of an academic department chairperson: "It is different in an academic institution because the people he is facilitating for are also professional people...I won't want to be looked upon as a subordinate per se." Another faculty member expressed the tension when she said:

I think we as faculty need to respect the position of the administrator as someone who is--yes talking levels--is a bit above, and we do need to listen and sometimes obey...I think that facet is there...but, I also think that in the business of education we are equals.

During the interviews the respondents were asked what qualities they would seek in a candidate for the chair. Respondents were unanimous both in what they said and what they did not say. Not a single respondent listed any requisite task skills, educational qualifications, or even teaching ability. All respondents referred to what are generally called human relations or interpersonal qualities.

One respondent commented "so much of being a department chair is like any other supervisory position; the biggest part of it is dealing with human beings and there is a lot of that you can't train for." When asked to expand on what was meant by "dealing with people," the respondent said "an understanding of what is important to faculty--what the priorities are..."

Another faculty member seemed to echo those same sentiments when asked what qualities should be sought in a potential candidate. "Empathy would be one of them...the top priorities [are] non-judgmental...[and] someone who would listen, a good listener." One respondent recognized the difficulty of expressing the qualities needed to be a good chairperson and said:

> It requires a whole lot of flexibility....[A chairperson must] have good people skills, because I think it is a very distinctly people job...I mean these are really ephemeral things that you could never put into a job description.

The Researcher's Summary

Any job description suggested by this study is confusing and difficult to summarize. The data etch a picture of incumbents the nature and scope of whose job nearly everyone connected to the college feels the right to define. The necessity of the chairpersons' acting as boundary spanners for all the various constituencies that make up the college community causes tensions that do not appear to be part of any other academic, quasi-administrative, or administrative position. The members of the constituencies rarely share their expectations of what they expect from chairpersons with one another or with members of other constituencies. The result is that the role of the department chairperson in the two-year college is nebulous and ill-defined. The resultant tensions are bound to create organizational and morale problems for organizations that continue to ignore the plight of the chairperson. One reader of a draft of this document commented that the study suggested an

> image of a job that has multiple expectations of a scope that may defy doing the job well and which cannot reach ideal levels. An incumbent is caught between hierarchical expectations to improve instruction and faculty expectations to be autonomous. [The chairperson is] an educational

administrator who is expected to please faculty through routine management functions (primarily budget preparation and class scheduling); the chairperson is removed from students and not expected to put them or their education as a high priority (Wayson, 1990, np).

It appears that faculty, administrators, and even the incumbents cannot agree on what they expect of a chairperson. Administrators seem reluctant to transfer real authority to chairpersons, and faculty seem unwilling to have a chairperson with real authority. A chairperson in a two-year college on a daily basis encounters demands that conflict because of the expectations others have of the chairperson. If the findings of this study are accurate and can be replicated at other two-year colleges, conflict, tension, and ambiguity may be an inherent part of a chairperson's job.

The Practitioner's Summary:

The last few paragraphs were written in the summer of 1990, when I was still blissfully ignorant of their import. At that time I taught and conducted my research unfettered by administrative responsibilities. A reorganization at the college where I teach resulted in the decision to split the chairperson's responsibilities between two individuals. Impetuously, I indicated my interest in the coordinator's position. The coordinator's job description is similar to that of the traditional chairperson's. For several years, I had written

about the chairperson's role, and in a weak moment I reasoned that because of my research, I knew what the job would entail.

By "doing" rather than "watching", I gained a much better understanding of why the interview participants were reluctant to invest leadership authority in the chair's position. The reluctance is grounded in a lack of identity. The dichotomous role of the chair being both faculty and administration means neither group completely trusts the incumbent. Upper level administrators worry that the chairs closeness to faculty may result in covert policy violations. Faculty fear the chair may become a stooge who justifies his or her actions in terms of "it's policy". Unfortunately, there is some truth to both assertions.

It is quite difficult for a "newly departed teacher" to totally wipe from memory all the "injustices" he or she suffered in the name of policy. Moreover, new chairs know full well that the success of the departmental mission depends entirely on the happiness of departmental faculty. Thus, she or he will occasionally be tempted to overlook some minor transgressions of policy. Deans also know this, perhaps because many of them were once chairs.

Although chairs can usually empathize with the stresses of the teaching faculty, the teaching faculty often does not care to empathize with the stresses of the chair. The hectic pace of the job, the menial nature of many of the tasks, the conflicting loyalties, the low regard for the duties of the position, the

ambiguity of most decisions, and so on are either not perceived or are considered trivial by "real faculty". When the chair bemoans his or her fate to upper level administrators, the usual reply is "well you wanted to be an administrator".

The initial reaction of the "newly departed faculty" is to pledge their loyalty to their roots--i.e. the faculty. When the idealism wears off, the new chair often finds herself or himself longing for the neatness, anonymity, certainty, and speedy resolution that policy provides. Policy brings order from chaos; however, reality is messy and getting it in "black and white" for posterity is just as likely to exacerbate the tension as it is to relieve it.

I think the problem is that the role of chairperson has become a bureaucratic functionary--an academic Ivan Ilyich. He or she lives in a world where the chairs' mentors include court decisions and federal regulations. A world where the buzz words are "assessment outcomes", "budget shortfalls", and "accountability". A world where presidents and vice-presidents are fearful of setting precedents. A world where vice-presidents of finance have more influence over academic decisions than vice-presidents of academic affairs. It seems hardly surprising in such a world that faculty describe chairpersons in terms of not being "a complete leader--less than that".

This "newly departed faculty member" will soon realize the wisdom of those respondents who noted the "grab-bag" nature of the chair's position. In the words of one respondent when

"nobody knows what to do with this chore so they throw it to the chair". Another respondent referred to it as "administrative trivial", and another questioned whether the institution made effective use of the chairperson's time. It seems that one line on the job description--and other assigned duties--takes up more than half my work day and nearly the entire weekend.

I mentioned to a colleague and friend that I was considering having a sign made that said: "I did not go to college to do this (expletive deleted)." He suggested that I have a second sign made to be placed beside the first saying: "And that is why I am so bad at it." Although his classes are now scheduled in several remote locations, he reminded me that a "newly departed faculty member" needs to have a sense of humor.

In the military they have a saying about the tendency of bodily elimination products to run downhill. Academic institutions emulate the military in many respects. You will make honest errors that can be attributed to you, but one third of the errors attributed to you are someone else's. If you simply accept that no one will gain from this knowledge, you will be less stressed out. A newly departed faculty member needs to learn that no matter who made the mistake, he or she owns it or will.

When you realize the "error of your ways", resist the temptation to devise hard and fast procedures to prevent reoccurrences. When we find ourselves besieged by difficult, ambiguous decision making opportunities, we often want to resolve

problems with policy--at least ad hoc policy. Although sometimes we need to formulate policy, more often we need to resolve the conflict in a humane fashion. Policy removes the very flexibility that the "first among equals" needs to remain "equal".

Two very strong currents push the "newly departed faculty" toward "putting it in the handbook". First, no matter what your origins, the minute you become an administrator, your paternity and integrity are immediately questioned. Faculty want it "in writing". This suspiciousness propels the "newly departed faculty member" to get it down "so we are all protected". Secondly, and most importantly the fanatic pace of the job tempts the "newly departed faculty member" to "settle this once and for all". Unfortunately, in a community of educators settling it once and for all is not possible--nor should it be.

I would like to leave you with two "philosophies" that have helped me. "Watch out where the huskies go and don't eat the yellow snow" (B.C. aka Johnny Hart). "Speak the truth, and leave immediately after" (Yugoslav Proverb).

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